

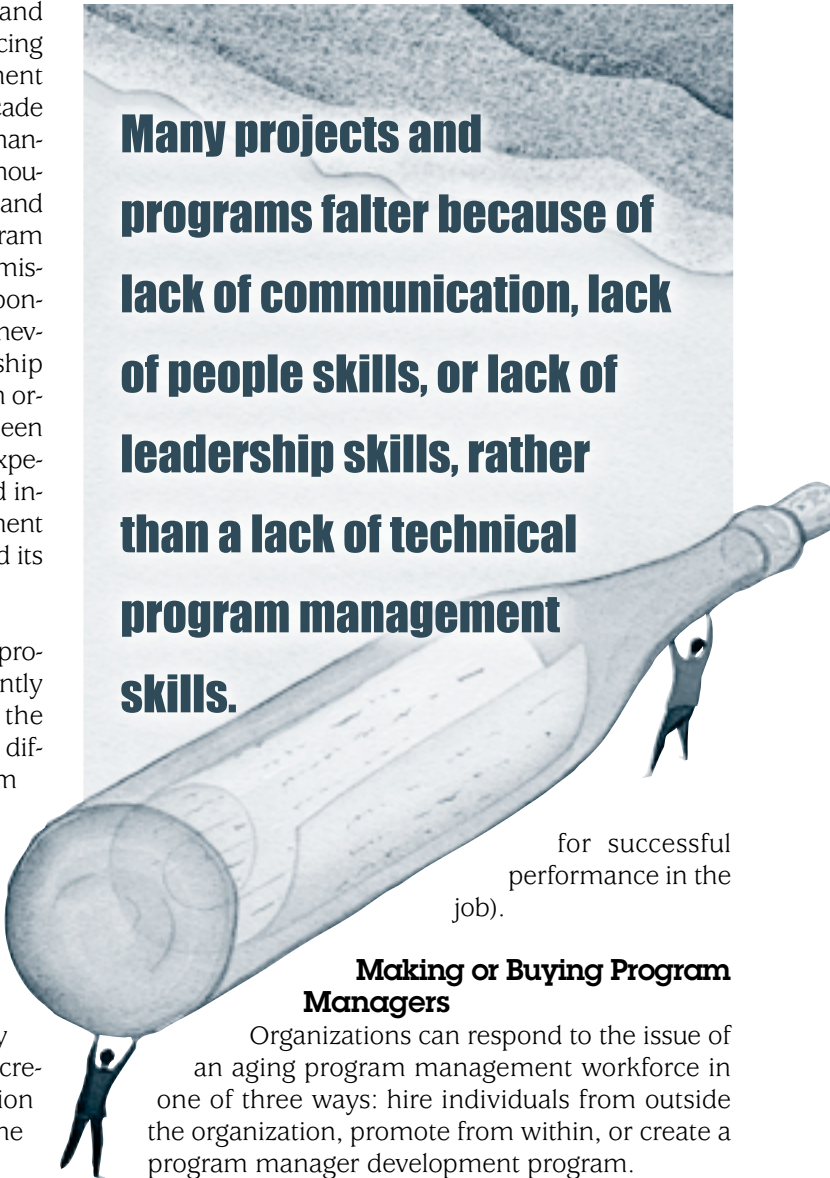
Developing Future Program Leaders: Part I

Timothy S. Kroecker

Many large corporations with high profile and major, multi-billion dollar programs are facing the same crisis that the federal government has been trying to address for nearly a decade now: Program leaders and senior project managers reach retirement age, leave, and take with them thousands of hours of accumulated knowledge, experience, and wisdom. In the corporations that have focused on program leadership development for succession planning, promising individuals receive technical training for high-responsibility program management positions, but they may, nevertheless, lack the depth of experience or leadership capability required to be effective in these positions. In organizations where leadership development has not been a priority, the lack of training, along with the gap in experience, will likely lead to the promotion of unprepared individuals and eventually, cases of serious mismanagement of resources. The end result costs the corporation (and its customers) millions of dollars.

Organizations need to focus on building the technical program management skills of their employees to efficiently manage programs, but they also need to focus on the leadership skills (a.k.a. “competencies”) that spell the difference between success and failure. Few with program management experience can refute that many projects and programs falter because of lack of communication, lack of people skills, or lack of leadership skills, rather than a lack of technical program management skills. When a project or program stalls, it is often the leadership skills—the ability to re-create and communicate a vision, and to motivate others with that vision—that revitalize it. To truly create the highest performers, organizations should create learning opportunities that combine the application of technical program management skills along with the softer skills involved in people management.

In this first of a three-part series to address the need to capture the expertise of the existing workforce and develop the next generation of program leaders, I will discuss the business case for doing so, define project and program management, and explore the concept of competencies (i.e., the knowledge, skills, and abilities required



Many projects and programs falter because of lack of communication, lack of people skills, or lack of leadership skills, rather than a lack of technical program management skills.

for successful performance in the job).

Making or Buying Program Managers

Organizations can respond to the issue of an aging program management workforce in one of three ways: hire individuals from outside the organization, promote from within, or create a program manager development program.

When faced with high-profile program manager openings, organizations often promote individuals from within the project manager ranks, for very good reasons: They are familiar with the organization and have outstanding technical project management skills. However, dealing with high profile, high-stakes programs often calls for a

Kroecker designs programs for the assessment and promotion of project managers to program managers in a variety of organizations and has a doctorate in industrial/organizational psychology.

deep appreciation of how to get things done within an organization as well as within the customer and/or industry, combined with a deft touch for handling senior executives. This unique combination of capabilities is difficult enough to find, cultivate, and utilize within the organization. In the best-case situations, the newly promoted individuals will grow into their positions within a relatively short period of time and make only minor or well-contained mistakes.

In the worst-case situation, these individuals will significantly mismanage a program, waste valuable time and resources, and demoralize the individuals working on the program. In order to successfully promote from within the organization, a developmental process must be in place to introduce key individuals to

the key leadership capabilities, provide “safe” opportunities to develop any critical skills they may lack, and then assign them successively more intense, complex programs to manage.

Another option that organizations can use to fill key openings is to hire individuals from the outside, particularly individuals transitioning out of other program manager or senior-level project manager positions within the military, Department of Defense, customer and supplier organizations, or competitor organizations where job responsibilities and the work environment are likely to be similar. This is often an effective way to bring in the most competent, skilled, and qualified individuals available. It is also an effective way to bring a new or fresh perspective to an organization. However, organizations that use this strategy need to explain the rationale for recruiting individuals from the outside or they risk losing their own “stars,” who may feel overlooked or believe their career options are limited.

Rather than recruiting from the outside or hoping to find a qualified internal candidate for a program leadership role, a more effective approach is to create a project-to-program manager development program that raises the overall leadership capabilities while also identifying the most qualified individuals for key positions. Creating this development program involves:

- Establishing a shared understanding of the responsibilities, tasks, and challenges of the role; and articulating the knowledge, skills, or abilities (competencies) required for successful performance in the program manager position
- Creating training programs and/or experiential assignments designed to develop these necessary competencies

- Selecting the appropriate assessment and development approach throughout the process.

Why Develop Program Leaders?

Program leadership is a critical skill to develop from the perspective of both the organization and the individual employee. The first reason is the cost of program manager mistakes or mis-steps. Individuals who manage the largest programs may be responsible for the expenditure of anywhere from thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars on a day-to-day basis. Even the best of senior program managers make some errors that can cost the organization huge sums of

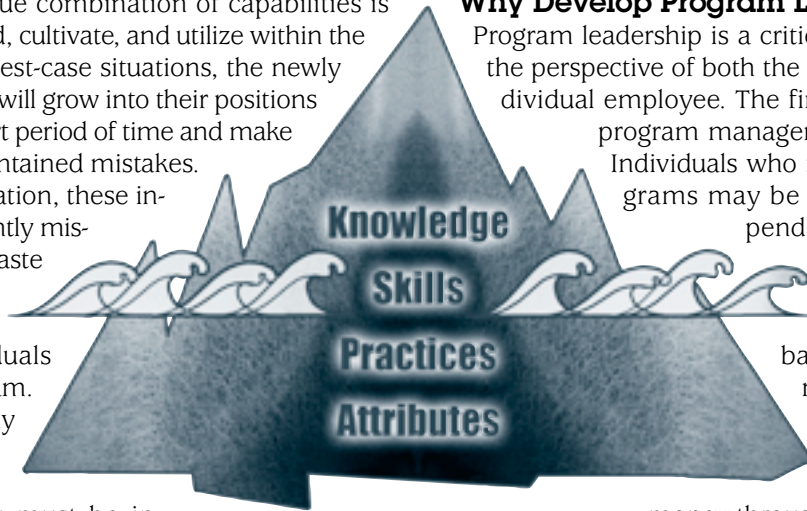
money through the misassignment of individuals to tasks, unanticipated scheduling difficulties, inability to influence powerful stakeholders, or a host of other difficulties. By increasing the skills of current and future program managers, organizations will mitigate mistakes and save time, money, and other resources.

The second reason to develop program leaders is to help separate leadership capabilities from technical/functional project management skills. Individuals who have outstanding technical project management capabilities are often promoted to senior-level positions where there is still a need for technical expertise but also a greater emphasis on the softer people skills. Individuals with no training or past experience with the non-technical skills often fail in the new, quasi-technical program manager positions.

Developing program leadership skills is also important from the individual employee’s perspective. Project managers, like most people, are looking for more interesting and challenging work. By developing their program leadership capabilities, they are more likely to receive stewardship of key programs or initiatives. In addition, project managers are also interested in pursuing those roles that are more financially rewarding.

Project and Program Management Defined

Because of the unique nature of the field of project and program management and the sometimes confusing interchanging of the two terms, it is necessary to define them clearly to understand the responsibilities that fall within each category. Each company, professional association, and organizational function is likely to define these terms somewhat differently. For the purposes of this series of articles, *program management* should be thought of as having the responsibility for the conceptu-



What are Competencies?



You're the Judge

Joe G. works in a small government office with five other government employees, three of whom are detailed from the military departments. Joe G. and his office-mates (one of whom is Bob M., active duty military) routinely serve as contracting officer technical representatives on contracts to obtain services in support of their work. A contractor who has done business with Joe's office decides to host a four-course celebration dinner with an open bar to recognize the contractor's 20 years of operation. After several months of planning and announcements of the upcoming event, the contractor invites Joe and his office-mates, as well as hundreds of other guests including other government personnel, contractors, and competitors. *Should Joe and his colleagues attend the dinner?*

Bob is detaching from the office after an almost four-year tour and moving to a new assignment at a very large organization that doesn't do business with the party-hosting contractor. *Should Bob attend the dinner?*

The verdict is on page 46.

alization, efficient management, and delivery of a large-scale, high-budget, key product or strategic initiative for the organization. Program management involves working with senior-level executives within the internal and customer organizations. It requires a sophisticated understanding of organizational dynamics and how to influence key stakeholders. For the purposes of these articles, *project management* is considered to mean having the responsibility for the efficient management and delivery of a subportion of a program. Project management involves managing a team of individual contributors and has a greater focus on the more functional project management skills.

Understanding the Role

To create a reliable program manager development program, an organization must first have a clear and thorough understanding of the position or positions involved. This understanding allows organizations to articulate the tasks performed, the types of decisions typically made, the significant challenges of the position, and the level and type of competencies required to successfully perform within the position.

To develop this understanding, an organization should conduct data-gathering interviews or focus groups with

Krieg Issues Updated "Acquisition of Services" Policy Memorandum

Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition, Technology and Logistics) Ken Krieg has issued an "Acquisition of Services" policy memorandum effective Oct. 2, 2006. Krieg's latest policy memorandum complies with Section 2330 of Title 10, U.S.C., as amended by Section 812 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2006, which requires the establishment and implementation of a management structure for the acquisition of services in the Department of Defense. It is intended to ensure that acquisitions of services support and enhance the warfighting capabilities of the Department of Defense and achieve the following objectives:



- Acquisitions of services are based on clear, performance-based requirements.
- Expected cost, schedule, and performance outcomes are identifiable and measurable.
- Acquisitions of services are properly planned and administered to achieve outcomes consistent with customer's needs.
- Services are acquired by business arrangements that are in the best interests of the Department of Defense and are in compliance with applicable statutes, regulations, policies, and other requirements, whether the services are acquired by or on behalf of the Department of Defense.
- Services are acquired using a strategic, enterprise-wide approach, which is applied to both the planning and the execution of the acquisition.

The updated policy memorandum supersedes the "Acquisition of Services" memorandum issued on May 31, 2002, and Enclosure 8, "Acquisition of Services," to DoD Instruction 5000.2, dated May 12, 2003. Read Krieg's memorandum in its entirety at:

<<http://akss.dau.mil/docs/2006-3064-ATL%20Complete.pdf>>.


key stakeholders/senior executives, incumbents, and their managers. Key stakeholders or senior executives are interviewed to gather their perspective on the job, to gain an organizational context for the importance of the job, and to inform them of the project and to garner support for it. High-performing, senior, project and program managers are interviewed to gather the specifics of their work: the responsibilities, challenges, resulting work products, and ways to measure successful performance. It is important to interview individuals from both of these groups to gain an understanding of what the jobs have in common and what distinctions there are between them. Job descriptions and existing training curricula should be reviewed to glean this type of information as well.

When seeking to understand the program manager role and the necessary competencies, organizations need to think not only about the current challenges and requirements of the job, but also try to anticipate the challenges and requirements over the next three to five years. It is also important to think more about the position itself (i.e., what is the job?) rather than one specific individual who holds it (i.e., what kind of person is in the job?). By understanding the key tasks and challenges of the program manager, and—most important—the competencies required to be successful within it, an organization can create a career development framework with training and development programs focused on addressing the principal job challenges.

Defining Required Competencies

Before articulating the competencies for a specific role, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of competencies. In general, competencies are the knowledge, skills, practices, and attributes that are related to superior performance in a role. *Knowledge* can be defined as the usable and accessible subject-matter content gained through education and experience (e.g., knowledge of quality control processes and financial acumen). *Skills* are reliably repeatable behaviors applied to specific tasks (e.g., using software or e-mail). *Practices* are behaviors that translate into effective performance when carrying out key tasks and responsibilities (e.g., leading by example, keeping the team informed). Practices are also the specific area of know-how that the senior, most experienced people will take with them when they retire. Finally, *attributes* are qualities of the person that are characteristic of him/her and which often will not change much over time (e.g., initiative, drive, or need for achievement).

Knowledge and skills are trainable, as long as the individual has the aptitude and interest in acquiring them. Attributes are generally not trainable; therefore, they tend to be used more effectively as selection criteria when recruiting or promoting. Practices are trainable, as long as the person has the attributes needed to demonstrate the



Organizations can hire individuals from outside the organization, promote from within, or create a program manager development program.

behavior effectively over time. (For example, the practice of keeping people informed is unlikely to be sustained over time if the person lacks the initiative to do it when the situation does not explicitly call for it.)

A complete competency model of program managers includes all of the above components. However, the majority of the competencies should be focused on practices because practices are developable; practices are observable—it isn't possible to assess what can't be seen; and practices have a more direct link to getting results in the job than attributes—that is, they are “face-valid” to project and program managers as well as senior executives.

As the graphic on page 13 suggests, if one could consider personalities and behaviors as an iceberg, skills and knowledge are above the water line and easier to assess/measure. But as individual behavior is translated in corporate effectiveness or practices, and interpreted as personal attributes, it becomes less easy to see clearly or define—and, therefore, more difficult to measure or assess.

Part II will more thoroughly detail the process of creating a complete understanding of the program manager using a “Success Profile” structure with the required competencies, and the challenges involved in defining program versus project management. Part III will explore the alternatives available when creating a program manager development program.

The author welcomes comments and questions. Contact him at tkroecker@cambriaconsulting.com.